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**BEOWULF 1598, 1996, 2026; USES OF THE IMPERSONAL  
VERB GEWEORÞAN**

Each of the three passages, Beowulf 1598, 1996, 2026, illustrates a different and rather distinct use of *geweorþan* as an impersonal verb. It is the object of this note, not so much to discuss the various interpretations that have been proposed for these passages, as to assemble the material that may help to an interpretation. A careful consideration of the context, in each case, leads to a fairly sure inference of the general idea expressed by the impersonal verb and its adjuncts. It may be expected, then, that some of the interpretations proposed by Beowulf scholars will find support in the material here collected. I have no new interpretations to suggest differing from those given by many of the later editors and annotators of the Beowulf; I have endeavored rather to present material that may furnish a sure basis for a correct interpretation of the passages.<sup>1</sup>

I

I consider first line 1598. The line with context, 1594b-1599, reads as follows:

Blonden-feaxe  
gomele ymb gödne ongeador spræcon,  
þæt hig þas æbelinges eft ne wendon  
þæt hē sige-hrēþig sēcean cōme  
mārne þēoden, þā þas monige gewearþ  
þæt hine seo b̄imwylf ȳbroten<sup>2</sup> hæfde

Here it is evident that the impersonal verb is used with the accusative of the person and the genitive of the thing. In illustration of this passage I begin with examples in which the meaning of the verb is plain and unmistakable.

þā gewearþ þām hlāford and þām hyrigmannum wiþ ānum peninge. Thorpe, *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica* (1834), p. 68. Here the meaning is plainly, *agree with, make a bargain with*. The dative expresses the parties to the agreement. The following example has the dative to express the parties to the agreement and the genitive with a clause to express the thing agreed upon: *gewearþ*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hall, J. L., Johns Hopkins University Circulars, Vol. 6, pp. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> MS. ȳbreoten.

him<sup>3</sup> and þam folce on Lindesige ānes, þaet hī hine horsian scolde and syþhan ealle ætgædere faran and hergian. Chron. 1014 (Earle, 151.1).<sup>4</sup> When both parties to the agreement are expressed by the same word the accusative seems to be used: Ac swīþe hradlice þaes þe hī þas geworden hæfde. Chron. 918 (MSS. Cott. Tib. B. I. Cott. Tib. A VI).<sup>5</sup> The verb may also express agreement, not between opposite or contending parties, but agreement or concord among friends or those of the same party, resolution to do a thing. Here we find the accusative of the person and the genitive of the thing; and gewearþ þā senatos him betweonum gif hī mon þriddan sīþe oferwunne þaet mon ealle Cartania towurpe (Igitur cum senatus delendam Carthaginem censisset) Orosius,<sup>6</sup> 210,15. Compare Orosius 178, 7, where the verbal expression translates *decreverunt*.<sup>7</sup> Similar to these examples, in expressing consensus of opinion, resolution,<sup>8</sup> is the following:

þa gewearþ ūsic þæt wē woldon swā  
drihten ādrifan, of þām dēoran hām  
Satan 256-7

Old Saxon has the same construction, expressing the same idea; for example,

thea gumon alle giward  
that sie ina gihōbin te hērōston  
gikurin ina te kuninge  
Heliand 2883-5

A consideration of the context of Beowulf 1599 in the light of the material brought together above makes it apparent that the idea expressed by the impersonal verb is *consensus of opinion*. “Many agreed in thinking (It was the opinion of many) that the seawolf had destroyed him.”

## II

Ic þe lange bæd  
þaet þū þone wæl-gæst wihte ne grētte  
lēte Sūb-Dene sylfe geweorþan  
gūþe wiþ Grendel. 1994b-1997a.

<sup>3</sup> Cnut.

<sup>4</sup> *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, Oxford, 1865.

<sup>5</sup> Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London, 1861, Vol. I, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Orosius*, London, 1883.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Oros. 208, 28; 280, 20.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of determinimation, resolution by a single person seems to be expressed in the following:

In this passage the impersonal verb is used with *lætan*. As far as the impersonal verb is concerned, we might consider this as an example of the use discussed above, where we have the parties to an agreement expressed by the accusative, and the thing agreed upon (or concerning which an agreement is made) by the genitive, a use well illustrated by Orosius, 204, 23, *þā hīc nānre sibbe gewearþ* (Latin, *sed infecto pacis negotio*). The expression in Beowulf 1997 might, then, be translated, "I long besought thee to let the South Danes themselves come to terms in the war against Grendel." This is Sievers' interpretation;<sup>9</sup> he proposes the translation, "Du solltest die Süd Dänen selbst über die bekämpfung Grendels einig werden lassen." We find, however, that these two verbs (*ge-weorhan* *lætan*) are used together in Middle English, Middle High German, Mittelniederländisch, and Modern Dutch; it will be well, therefore, to consider this idiom in these languages in connection with Beowulf 1997, which affords, I believe, the only example of its use in Anglo-Saxon.

In Middle English the idiom is rather common; I give below some examples: Marthe haveþ hire mester, leteþ hire iwurþen, Ancren Riwle, p. 414. He lette þe kyng al yworþe and to Rome aȝeyn drowȝ. Robert of Gloucester, p. 67.

Loue hem and lakke hem nouȝte, late god take the veniaunce  
Theigh thei done yuel, late thou god y-worthe

Piers Ploughman B. 6. 227-8.

For-thi I conseille alle the comune to lat the catte worthe

Pr. Pl. B. Piol. 187.<sup>10</sup>

In all these passages the meaning plainly is, *let one alone, leave the matter to one.*

For the idiom in Middle High German, see Benecke und Müller, *Wörterbuch*, where the following examples are given, läzert in geworden: *überlasst ihn sich selbst, lasst ihn in ruhe*, Erlösung 6038. Swie du sie niht geworden läst. Erlösung 5147.

Cosijn, *Anteekeningen op den Beowulf*, p. 30, calls attention to the expression *laten geworden* in Mittelniederländisch<sup>11</sup> and

bā gewearh hōne weregan

1st b. at the same date. See 660.

<sup>8</sup> Paul and Ruth 16-27

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pr. Pl. B. 6, 84; C. 11, 163. For other examples see Maetzner, s. v. „gewurzen“<sup>3</sup>

refers to Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, II, 1890. Verdam gives as equivalents in Modern Dutch, *laten begaan*, *laten geworden*, *laten betijen*, *zijn gang laten gaan*. Among the quotations illustrating the idiom are the following: Laet mi metten doden gewerden, ic salne doen wreken. Lanc. III, 13673. Laet mi selven ghewerden Pass. W24d. Wat God wille doen metti laet hem ghewerden wat si *Dyst. Cat.* II, 12. Dat wi Gode ghewerden laten ons selfs ende alre dinc Ruusb. 2, 195.<sup>11</sup>

A comparison of these examples from Middle English, Middle High German, and Mittelniederländisch<sup>12</sup> with the expression in Beowulf leads, I believe, to the conclusion that the idiom in question was in use in Anglo-Saxon, and that we have an example of it in Beowulf 1997. That we have no other examples in Anglo-Saxon is probably purely accidental; the frequent use of the idiom in Middle English shows this. We are justified, then, in proposing, as Cosijn<sup>14</sup> does, as a translation of this passage, “that you leave to the South Danes themselves the war against Grendel” or “that you let the South-Danes alone in their war against Grendel.”

### III

Sio gehäten [is]  
 geong, gold-hroden, gladum suna Frödan;  
 [h]afaj þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,  
 rices hyrde, ond þæt ræd talaþ,  
 þæt hē mid þy wife wæl-fæhpa dæl  
 sæcca gesette. 2024b-2029a.

I consider last Beowulf 2027,

hafaj þæs geworden wine Scyldinga.

The nearest parallel to this in Anglo-Saxon is Andreas 307,

hū gewearþ þē þæs, wine lēofesta,  
 þæt hū sābeorgas sēcan woldes, etc.

In this passage the verb is plainly impersonal, with accusative of the person and genitive of the thing followed by a clause. We

<sup>11</sup>“*Geweरþan lätan*, laten begaan, niet tusschen beide komen, is volkommen mnl. *laten geworden*.”

<sup>12</sup> Compare with the last two examples the quotation from Piers Pl. given above.

<sup>13</sup> Modern Dutch also has the idiom, *iemand laten geworden*, *to let one alone*, *to let one have his own way*.

<sup>14</sup>“Dat gjij de Zuid-Denen zelve den strijd tegen Grendel liet uitvechten” (Anteek. p. 30).

may, therefore, infer that the parallel passage in Beowulf has the same construction. As far as I am able to discover, these are the only passages in Anglo-Saxon that show just this construction. The idiom is well illustrated and its meaning clearly shown in Old High German. There are four examples in Otfried.

Thiu hiun warun filu frō, *giwerden mohta siu es thō*  
*sie habetun thár selbon krist ther alles blides furista ist.*

II, 8, 9, (Marriage at Cana)

Wola thaz githígini thaz nōz tho thaz gisídili  
*thia súazi sines múases giwerdan mohta sie thes.*

IV, 9, 20 (Christ eats the passover  
 with his disciples.)

So sie thaſ tho gázun thiſ in themo gráſe sazun  
*ioh mannlīh thaſ sáſ ward, so sie theſ brótes giward.*

III, 6, 44. (Feeding of the five thousand)

Thie langum ziti krist gisáh, ioh ouh selbo zi imo sprah  
*ob inan giwurti thaz er heil wurti?*

III, 4, 19, (Healing of the man at the pool of  
 Bethesda).

Graff, Sprachschatz I, 992, puts the first three of these cases under the strong verb *gawerdan* (angels. *geweorthan*, alts. *giwerthan*), with the remark “ ‘mih gawirdit thes’ gehört doch wohl hieher.” Kelle in the glossary of his edition of Otfried has the following: giwirdit [st. v.], es lüstet; ich habe a) Verlangen; b) Freude; c. acc. der Person und a) gen. der sache. II, 8, 9,: die Brautleute bei der Hochzeit von Kana konnte dessen gelüsten, sie konnten ihre Freude daran haben, dass Christus in ihrer Mitte sass. IV, 9, 20; die Jünger konnten erfreut, stolz darauf sein, dass sie mit Christo assen. III, 6, 44; wenn sie nach dem Brode Verlangen trugen. III, 4, 20. ob ihn gelüstete dessen, ob er darnach Verlangen trüge.

Piper, in his *Glossar*<sup>15</sup> gives the following: giuerdan st. v. *unpers.* mit Acc. d. Pers. *es verlangt mich nach, ich habe Freude an;* a. mit dem Gen. d. S II, 8, 9. IV, 9, 20; 3.s. *praet.* i. III 6.44.-b. mit abh. Satze: 3.s. *praet.* III, 4, 20. Schade, *Altdeutsches Wörterbuch*, p. 277, has: giwérðan ahd., mhd. gewerden st. v. abl. 1 *unpers.* m. Acc. u. Gen. *gefallen:* mih giwirdit des Zu wérd *dignus.* Wackernagel, *Altdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, p. 110, has, gewérden, gewerthen, ahd. giwerdan, stv. *unpersoenl.* m. acc. u. gen. *gefallen;* zu wért.

<sup>15</sup> Piper, Paul, *Otfriids Evangelienbuch*, II Theil, 1884, p. 579.

All this plainly establishes, for Old High German, as the meaning of the idiom under consideration, *it pleases me, suits me with respect to this; I desire it.* In the want of examples in Anglo-Saxon sufficient to establish clearly the meaning of the idiom, the evidence from Old High German becomes of great significance for the light it throws upon the passages from Beowulf (l. 2027) and Andreas (l.307) quoted above. In view of this, I suggest as a translation of Beowulf 2024b-2029a, "She, young, gold-adorned, hath been promised (betrothed) to the gracious son of Froda; *this hath pleased the friend of the Scyldings*, guardian of the realm, and he counteth it good policy, that he with the woman hath settled many feuds, strifes." It will be noticed that the translation suggested does not differ essentially from that already proposed by several editors and translators; but what I have brought together here establishes, I trust, this rendering on firm ground.

For Andreas 307-310 I suggest, "*How hath it pleased (suited) thee*, dearest friend, that thou, deprived of treasure, wouldest seek the sea-hills, the bounds of the ocean-currents, over the cold cliffs approach a ship."

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